DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 332 516 FL 019 159

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TITLE Training Teachers in the Natural Approach.
PUB DATE 91
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Central States Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (Indianapolis, IN, March 21-24, 1991).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College Second Language Programs; Higher Education; *Instructional Improvement; *Language Teachers; Program Descriptions; Program Design; Second Language Instruction; Teacher Education; Teaching Assistants
IDENTIFIERS *Natural Approach (Languages); *Purdue University IN

ABSTRACT

This report describes the use of the natural approach to second language instruction to improve the teacher training program at Purdue University (Indiana). First, the report discusses the establishment of a permanent, non-tenure-track position of Assistant Director for Beginning Levels of Spanish. Second, focus is on the improvement of the orientation program so teacher trainees would be better prepared for their classroom experience. The third part of the program is a one-credit-hour fall semester course in theory and classroom application of the Natural Approach for all new staff teaching introductory courses. The fourth program element involves classroom observation and formal evaluation by the supervisor and students. Use of videotapes of a variety of courses illustrating use of visuals, realia, props, small group and paired activities, and good student-teacher interaction is also anticipated as an extension of the current program design. (MSE)

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Central States Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages

Training Teachers in the Natural Approach

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Training Teachers in the Natural Approach

Quite a few years ago, after my initial involvement with training teaching assistants, I felt that something should be written addressing the critical problem of t.a. training, or the lack there of, in our colleges and universities. Through the years foreign language educators have attempted to deal with the theoretical and practical applications of a variety of language teaching methodologies. We have advanced from the old grammar translation approach of the forties to the audio-lingual method of the sixties to the present -day Natural Approach. As Beverly Watkins states in an article in The Chronicle of Higher Education, "A new teaching technique that stresses "doing" rather than "knowing" is revitalizing the foreign language classroom."[1] We have come to know this new technique as the Natural Approach.

In addition, advances in technology have outdated what most of us remember as the typical language laboratory. In ideal situations we now have at the touch of a button an automated lab consisting of VCR'S, satellite hook-ups, and the most updated of computer equipment.

And yet, with all of the advances we have made in both methodology and technology, we have lagged far behind in the single most important aspect of the foreign language classroom - teacher training. In most of our programs we have taken new graduate students with little or no training in the area of teaching, given them a syllabus and a text and turned them loose in the classroom.

The purpose of this portion of our presentation is to focus on some of the concrete ways we at Purdue University have worked to improve our teacher training program. Hopefully, the audience for which this paper is intended, i.e. college or university staff involved in directing lower level language programs, will find our program worthwhile and any aspect of it easily adaptable to their specific needs

When we adopted the text Dos Mundos four years ago, many of our colleagues were skeptical about the Natural Approach. After all, how can you teach a foreign language without explaining grammar? This proved and continues to be, one of the major problems which faces us in training teachers in the Natural Approach. It is very difficult to change deeply imbedded attitudes about the place of grammar in the curriculum. However, we strictly adhere to a "no grammar instruction" policy and complete use of the target language in all levels 101-204.

For the first two years our program had organizational difficulties due to internal changes in st ff and temporary staff being put in charge of directing lower level courses. However, in 1989 a permanent faculty director was assigned and positive changes began to take place. One of the major and most innovative changes for our department was to make my position, Assistant Director of

Beginning Levels of Spanish, a permanent, non-tenure track position in the department. This position, which I had held for five years under the title of visiting instructor or lecturer, was created in response to the growing enrollment in our beginning level Spanish courses. It became evident to the faculty director and to the head of the department that the day-to-day running of these courses was depriving the tenured faculty director of much needed research and class preparation time. In response to a department request the Dean of the School of Liberal Arts approved this position as a permanent one in the spring of 1990.

What have the resulting benefits been to our program? First of all , it has given me credibility in the department which I previously did not have. Secondly, it has lessened considerably the demands on the time of the faculty director. Thirdly, and most importantly, it has allowed us to move ahead to improve our program in many areas, primarily teacher training.

Since our beginning and intermediate language program now involves five courses with approximately 3,000 students and 60 teachers, where previously we had only two courses with 500 students and 25 teachers, we have created positions for course supervisors. These supervisors report directly to me and are carefully chosen from our pool of current graduate teaching assistants or instructors and are assigned supervision of one of these five courses. Their primary responsibilities include:

1. organizing of quizzes and exams
2. working with teachers in their particular course with regard to any questions or problems that may arise during the semester
3. handling Drop/Add at the beginning of the semester
4. assisting the Assistant Director with class observations
5. reviewing grades at the end of the semester.

Any problems and/or questions they have about anything they report to me. We also meet at least two times during the semester to discuss upcoming exams, oral interviews, evaluations, etc. They in turn meet with their teachers to keep them informed.

In turn, any serious problem that I feel needs to be dealt with by someone other than myself, involves consultation with the faculty director. He is aware at all times of any teacher, course, or student related problem that I might be dealing with. The key to much of our success has been due to good communication, which is the key to a good program.

With this background, I would now like to address the primary question in point - How do we train our teachers in the Natural Approach?

The first step was the creation of my position and that of our individual course supervisors. Secondly, we felt our orientation program was an area we could improve upon in order to better prepare our new teachers for their classroom experience. In the past we had time blocked out during the week before classes to meet with teachers and go over many of the administrative details of the

course and the department. In addition teachers were required to attend meetings with the graduate advisor, the business manager, the schedule deputy, and the language lab technicians. All of these meetings were important in their own right, but none was accomplishing our goal of better teacher training. Therefore, last fall we drastically revised our week of orientation. We blocked our more time for group training sessions with the faculty director and myself. We also set aside more time for individual course sessions with our supervisors to discuss what they had been exposed to in the large group sessions. Our first general session during orientation dealt with an introduction to the Natural Approach via video tapes and a general presentation on the methodology. We find that many graduate students, having been literature majors in college, come to us knowing nothing about Natural Approach terminology or methodology. Our intent, therefore, was a complete immersion into the Natural Approach. After that session, the teachers had a series of small group meetings during which they were encouraged to do micro-teaching in front of their peers in order to feel more comfortable with the material and to try and use the Natural Approach before getting in front of their own students. The small group sessions also provided time for teachers to get to know their course supervisors and to become familiar with the text, workbook, transparencies and other course materials. Our hope was to give them as much hands-on time as possible so that they would be ready to enter the classroom with a sense of confidence instead of the apprehension, which is usually the case with new teachers.

On the fourth day of the week we had a workshop with one of the authors of our text. He gave a presentation on the Natural Approach and gave teachers many ideas and suggestions on how to use the variety of activities in the text. He re-enforced the importance of using the target language exclusively and discussed the role of grammar in the Natural Approach classroom. This workshop proved to be an enormously positive and experience for all involved.

We concluded our week with a general session at which time we discussed all of the necessary administrative details involved in teaching a beginning level course, answered questions about procedures for the first day of class, and discused upcoming class observations that would be done by our staff. At the conclusion of the meeting we provided each teacher with a handbook which covers the "everything you wanted to know, but forgot to ask" questions that arise over the course of the semester.

The third part of our teacher-training program is a one credit hour course that is taught in the fall semester for all new staff teaching the beginning level courses. This year the course was divided into two parts: 1.) theory and background in the Natural Approach and 2.) methodology. The theoretical portion of the course dealt with a variety of articles and books on the Natural Approach and the methodology portion involved the practical application of the Natural Approach in the classroom. Some of the topics included how to make a lesson plan that incorporates paired and group activities; how to personalize and expand the material in the form of Q/A practice; how to use appropriate teacher-

talk in the classroom; how to handle attendance and discipline problems, etc. In other words, a wide variety of topics, all of which represent real concerns or problems for a new, inexperienced teacher.

In addition to class attendance and readings, another requirement for the course was that each teacher observe at least two classes during the semester. The classes to be observed were selected by us to insure observation of a class taught by an experienced and representative teacher. At the end of the semester teachers turned in a short paper recounting their observations of the classes visited and how the Natural Approach was being utilized.

A final aspect of our teacher-training program involves class observations and evaluations of our staff. This is probably one of, if not the most threatening aspect of teacher-training for new teachers. We feel that it is extremely important to visit the classes of all new teachers as soon as possible (at least within the first month of class) in order to provide them with feedback and to offer suggestions for improvement early on in the semester. In the past it took almost an entire semester to fit these observations into my schedule, along with my other supervision and teaching duties. One of the major benefits of our new system was that the course supervisors took over the tedious and time consuming job of Drop/Add during the second and third weeks of each semester. This allowed me to begin visiting classes in the second week and by the fourth week of the semester I had visited all thirty of our new teachers and by the end of the semester, all sixty teachers had been observed, some more than once.

Our procedure for observations is fairly simple. After a teacher has been observed it is their responsibility to make an appointment to see the supervisor who has observed them. At that meeting the supervisor discusses both the positive and the problem areas of the observed class. We try and make this a positive and helpful aspect of our teacher-training, rather than a negative one that causes ill-will and hard feelings. We stress the good aspects of the class and then offer suggestions for improvement in areas that appeared to be weak. Many times we suggest observing a class of one of our supervisors or an experienced teacher. This one-on-one session also allows me to personally talk with teachers and offer suggestions privately, in a non-threatening atmosphere. On the whole our teachers have welcomed our suggestions, and with a few exceptions, they feel that the evaluation process is beneficial to their improvement as classroom teachers.

After all of the observations are completed a formal department evaluation is prepared and each teacher has an opportunity to meet with me and discuss this evaluation if they so desire. So far, this system has proved to be very effective with the number of teachers we are working with and we are targeting teachers with problems early on. We are able to help them far sooner than before. On the whole our teachers improve with experience and this becomes evident when they are observed the second semester.

Another component of the evaluation process consists of student evaluations which are conducted both by the department and our course. Although we don't place a high amount of emphasis

on student evaluations, we do use them as a cross reference in certain cases, especially teachers we feel are weak or about whom students have frequently voiced complaints.

In conclusion, we feel that we have made great strides in improving our teacher-training program. However, there is always room for improvement and we are not content to maintain the status quo. We continue to look at revisions and/or ways of doing some things differently. In fact, one improvement we are hoping to implement in our fall orientation is the use of video tapes which we have recorded using our own teachers as models. We would like to have a variety of classes taped which will illustrate the use of visuals, realia, props, small group/paired activities, and good student-teacher interaction. These videos should prove to be a valuable training tool and one which will allow new teachers to visually observe the Natural Approach in action in our program.

Footnotes

[1] Watkins, Beverly, "Foreign-Language Instruction is Being Revitalized as Faculty Members Stress Doing' Over 'Knowing', The Chronicle of Higher Education , February 22, 1989, Volume XXXV, Number 24, p. A1.